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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 023608

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OTTAWA FOR USINT COM MICHAEL PARMLY  
DEPT FOR H, AND FOR WHA/CCA

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TAGS: [OREP](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [CU](#)  
SUBJECT: CUBAN REGIME STIFFS CODEL FLAKE

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Classified By: Charge d'affaires Buddy Williams; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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11. (C) Summary: A Congressional Delegation led by Rep. Jeff Flake (R/AZ) spent the December 15-17 weekend publicly urging a change in US policy, but privately getting rebuffed by a Cuban regime that insisted it had no reason or desire to reform itself. The CODEL presented a letter requesting release of 59 political prisoners and urged the GOC to give it something to use if/when the Congress holds hearings in 2007 on Cuba policy. Cuban interlocutors, chiefly Foreign Minister Perez Roque, Communist Party Foreign Relations Secretary Remirez Estenoz, and Assembly president Ricardo

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Alarcon, told them they were only interested in enhanced cooperation with the U.S. on narcotics, migration and counter-terrorism. In a pre-departure press conference the CODEL members continued to advocate a change in US policy and opening of negotiations with the GOC. This would respond to a line to that effect in Raul Castro's December 2 speech. They emphasized, that on the US side, they would look into trade, travel and oil exploration. However, responding to questions from international media, the CODEL expressed disappointment that Raul Castro wouldn't see them, and one member with the GOC's unwillingness to have free elections, free access to media, and to respect human rights. The CODEL also repeated in public the GOC's line to them that Fidel Castro did not have cancer and was recovering, although private discussion of that subject made GOC interlocutors nervous. The CODEL did not meet with dissidents, but accepted a letter from some of them urging that any follow-up from a recently published GAO report not cut off their sources of assistance. End Summary.

12. (SBU) A bipartisan CODEL led by Reps. Jeff Flake and William Delahunt (D/MA) came to Havana December 15 to 17 with the express purpose of reaching out to the GOC in response to Raul Castro's line in his Armed Forces Day speech regarding negotiating with the USG. The full CODEL roster was as follows:

Reps Flake, Delahunt, as noted,  
Michael Conoway (R/TX)  
Lincoln Davis (D/TN)  
Jo An Emerson (R/MO)

Jane Harman (D/CA)  
Gregory Meeks (D/NY)  
Jerry Moran (R/KS)  
Jim McGovern (D/MA)  
Hilda Solis (D/CA)

Most of the delegation had traveled to Cuba before, had worked on the Trade Sanctions Reform Act (TSRA) of 2000, and/or were members of the "Cuba Working Group." They advertised themselves as the biggest CODEL to Cuba in 50 years, and said that the size of the delegation, as well as the visit's timing, was significant.

13. (C) Meetings with Cuban Government officials: Their interlocutors were as follows:

- ALIMPORT Director Pedro Alvarez
- Communist Party International Relations Secretary Fernando Remirez Estenoz
- Basic Industries Minister Yadira Garcia
- National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon
- Central Bank President Francisco Soberon
- Foreign Minister Felipe Perez-Roque.

All of them had a scripted set of talking points and did not give the impression that they could speak freely. CODEL members said they had hoped the Cubans could meet them halfway and give them something to work with when they held hearings in 2007. Answer: "The ball is in your court, we have no reason or desire to reform our governance. We are the victims of your policy, but would be willing to expand cooperation on narcotics, migration and terrorism." When presented with a list of political prisoners that the CODEL asked to have released, the Cubans responded criticizing U.S. human rights practices, particularly at Guantanamo. They stated the party line on the "Five Heroes" (spies imprisoned in the USA) and on the Posada Carriles case. The ones with economic and trade portfolios made the case that Cuba's

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economy was booming, and that US Agricultural Exports under TSRA were significant (Cuba in 23rd place worldwide as farm

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export destination), but only a small fraction of the benefit potentially available if/when the embargo ends and trade opens up. Perez Roque said that Cuban economic growth is strong and irreversible, meaning that Cuba did not need more trade with the USA and would not accept any preconditions for trade talks. The CODEL also discussed offshore oil exploration with Yadira Garcia.

14. (SBU) Fidel/Raul: The CODEL had requested a meeting with Raul Castro but was not granted one. When they discussed Fidel Castro's health or succession plans the Cuban interlocutors got nervous and told them the party line: "Fidel is recovering, and does not have cancer." Fidel Castro's medical condition was the subject of media questioning at the CODEL's departure press conference. Rep. Harmon repeated what she had been told by the Cubans, adding that public statements by intelligence officials on this subject should be based on facts.

15. (C) Other meetings: The CODEL saw Cardinal Jaime Ortega, who was supportive of their position against the US embargo, saying that it was wrong to wait for a popular pressure to change the government of Cuba before engaging with the country. Ortega, on the other hand, was critical of Hugo Chavez, who he said Cubans would never accept as a replacement for Fidel Castro. The CODEL met with some members of the diplomatic corps, all of whom disagree with the US embargo, but some of whom described their outreach programs with civil society. The Swiss ambassador also had a private meeting with Rep. Flake at which he described GOC harassment and administrative squeezing of USINT, and the role of the Swiss in seeking solutions to USINT's operational

problems. The CODEL did not meet with any dissidents, but accepted a letter (via USINT) from Vladimiro Roca (also signed by Martha Beatriz Roque, Gisela Delgado and Elizardo Sanchez) making the case for continued USAID assistance to the democratic opposition, even if the GAO has found a few isolated irregularities.

¶6. (C) USINT Briefing: COM Parmly hosted and led a briefing at The Residence Sunday morning, at which USINT described the regime's continuing totalitarian style since Raul Castro took charge July 31, with special emphasis on human rights abuses and a more realistic appraisal of the Cuban economy. CODEL members pushed hard on what they called the "failure" of US policy and the need to relax the embargo, especially the travel restrictions. We replied that containment of the USSR took over 50 years to prove that it was the correct policy, and was consistent with our values. Now, with stresses and strains about to weigh heavily upon Raul Castro, the Administration did not see this as the appropriate time to unilaterally give away the embargo, in exchange for nothing. COM Parmly reiterated the President's and other senior USG officials' comments to the effect that USG policy underscored the lead of the Cuban people to bring about change, echoed last week by A/S Shannon's statement that Raul Castro's negotiation should be with the Cuban people, not with the USG. Additionally, our Coast Guard attache answered questions regarding ongoing US working-level contact with the GOC on narcotics and migration issues.

¶7. (SBU) Media: International media were all over the CODEL (septel provides more detail), throughout their visit. Members took many opportunities to give on-camera interviews and state their views about US policy toward Cuba. Before the final press conference, Rep. Flake released this statement:

"It is time for the U.S. to enter a dialogue with Cuba.

America has important interests in Cuba and strong disagreements with the Cuban government. At a time when Cuba is changing and the opportunities to advance our interests and values in Cuba are not known, we unanimously believe that the U.S. should respond positively to the proposal made by Raul Castro in his speech of Dec. 2.

No one should be under the illusion that a negotiation with Cuba would be easy, or that results would be guaranteed. But if we refuse to engage in normal diplomacy, we are guaranteed

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to produce no results at all.

We should be consulting regularly about migration issues, to protect national security and to save lives. We should see if more can be done to fight drug trafficking. We should be talking right now about Cuba's offshore oil exploration, given its potential impact on our own marine environment. We know there are fugitives from American justice here, and there are some in U.S. custody who are of interest to Cuba. Perhaps there is the basis of an agreement there.

There may be other areas of opportunity. Only by probing Cuba's proposal is it possible to find out. Our visit provided the first official American contact with senior Cuban officials since the delegation of executive powers last July 31 (from Fidel to Raul Castro). We appreciate the time and courtesies that our hosts extended throughout our visit."

¶8. (C) Comment: If nothing else, this visit proved that the current Cuban ruling clique is wedded to its totalitarian style, unwilling to make even the slightest concession, even when being presented a generous opening offer by the CODEL members. The visit also demonstrates that Cuba's strategy to engage a wide swath of the U.S. congress on agricultural exports has paid dividends. The bipartisan nature of the delegation is attributable to this strategy. The CODEL's

trip reinforced to us that the post-Castro future of Cuba should not be plotted out in meetings between the USG and Cuba's Gang of Four, but rather by an open consultation between the GOC and the Cuban people.

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